

# ROMEO, ROMEO,

## WHEREFORE ART THOU?

*A blind date without a tragic ending*

*By Wendy Dennis*

I would like to tell you that I wasn't nervous. That I took the whole affair in stride and deported myself in a mature manner. But how do I explain the fact that moments before his arrival I was watching for the cab's headlights through the slats of my shuttered bedroom window, having just thrown back a tumblerful of plonk to ward off the dread of sprouting a pimple the size of the Star Ruby of India. Ah, but I get ahead of myself.

It was all Marsha's idea. Calling one day shortly before my birthday and finding me in a stygian gloom, she decides that what I need to cheer me up is a wonderful gift. No argument there. I tell her that I cannot, in good conscience, accept a villa in the south of France. What she has in mind, however, is an evening out with a charming man—you remember: a date. Her plan is to find the lucky fellow, orchestrate the evening and pay the shot. After that we're on our own.

At first I humor her, but then I warm to the idea. She has a few questions, by way of preliminary research:

"Can he be gay?"

"Nooo. . ."

"OK, OK. . .it was a long shot. What about married?"

"Aw c'mon Marsha."

"Oy, this is going to be tougher than I thought. Well, how do you feel about younger? Can he be younger?"

"Absolutely. The younger the better."

She tracks him down that night at a CBC party. An associate producer who earned her stripes in casting, my girlfriend makes a giggly, intoxicated pitch to an actor named Stuart Hughes, who has a secondary lead in *Skate*, the show they're there to wrap. She explains her "unique casting problem"; the role, apparently, intrigues him. "I'm out of town until the 2nd," he says, gently squeezing her arm before disappearing into the crowd, "but I'll be back on your friend's birthday. I'd be delighted. Give me a call."

My phone rings the next morning—Marsha to report that she's lined things up. I grill her mercilessly, getting highly suspicious when she describes the sort of man you only meet in novels. He is, allegedly, a sweet, intelligent, easygoing guy with an engaging manner and the ability to wear a trench coat. "Very *GQ*—with the collar turned up just so." Naturally, I become convinced that she's holding back some grisly detail—maybe he has no teeth or something. Marsha swears that he has a "great smile," but, to get me off her back, she promises to pull his résumé out of

the CBC talent bank.

"His résumé? Marsha, I don't care if he can juggle. What about his looks?"

"He's good-looking."

"How good-looking?" You don't want your date to be prettier than you are.

"Good-looking," she sighs. "He's very good-looking."

A few days later a friendly, mellifluous voice introduces himself as Stuart Hughes on the telephone. We sail through the arrangements, but just before signing off I ask whether Marsha has warned him about the third eye in the middle of my forehead. He finds this amusing, which I take to be an encouraging sign. I love a man who laughs at my jokes.

So here I am, jumpy at the bedroom window. After high-level consultation with my younger sister, who advises in these matters, I have decided to go with an urban cowgirl look. In order to achieve a fashionably unkempt who-has-time-to-worry-about-such-things effect, I have spent the better part of an hour painstakingly moussing, scrunching and blow-drying my hair. Right on schedule the headlights swing into view. Unable to steal a preview glimpse of my mystery date in the darkness, I compose myself and answer the door. Before me, flashing the killer smile that Marsha had warned me about, stands a man—late 20s, medium height—with sculptured features and luxuriant, butterscotch-colored hair. He is wearing one of those loosely fitting jackets, unbuttoned with an insouciant air. Slung around his neck, *very GQ*, is a supple scarf of tan leather. He is heartbreakingly gorgeous.

We slide into the back seat of the cab and I begin to chatter idiotically. Then, in a fit of recklessness, I clutch his arm. "We'll get to the date part in a minute, Stuart," I assure him. "First I have to know why you are *doing* this?" His eyes flicker with amusement. There is a brief, impeccably timed pause and then a coy smile, followed by the admission that he's been lured by the chance for "an adventure." This remark has the effect of making me go all girlish—bashful smile, hair toss, the whole bit. Fortunately, the cab lurches to a stop in front of the restaurant before I can do anything really appalling—like giggle. My dream date ushers me out of the cab and settles up, while I stand on the pavement secretly praying that I will run into several people I know whom I have long wished to drive insanely jealous.

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On Marsha's suggestion that I would enjoy some place "fun and funky" he has chosen Le Marais, a charming, lively, intimate bistro on Queen Street West. The waiter advises that our table will be ready shortly. Would we like to have a drink at the bar? We would. As I am being gracefully relieved of my jacket, I notice people staring. I am somewhat chagrined to realize they are staring at him. As we settle in, I am vaguely aware of the clinking of glasses, the staccato of conversations and the better-than-average odds of lipstick on my teeth. The evening stretches out before us, ripe with possibility. "So," I leap in, leading with a dazzling conversation-starter, "how'd ya get into acting?"

A career on the stage was probably meant to be. He grew up in a closely knit Toronto family, the son of a music professor. As kids, his two brothers and he played in the theatre aisles while their father rehearsed in the pit. As far back as he can remember, his mother bundled the boys up and took them along to the opera and ballet. By 8, already aware from observing his father's example that a performer's life was more about discipline than glamor, he was studying acting; by 12, after the family had moved to London, Ontario, he was involved in community theatre; by high school, he was doing Shakespeare and Molière. During his fourth year in York University's theatre program, he was down at Toronto Free Theatre "carrying a spear." After graduation in '82, he spent four seasons at the Shaw Festival, living like a gypsy, crisscrossing the country off-season, working with Brian Bedford in *The Real Thing*, learning, after an eight-year sabbatical from the violin, to play Mendelssohn's complicated Concerto in E minor ("black spots on a page") for a role in *Mephisto* at The Citadel in Edmonton, and performing, at Young People's Theatre, for entranced youngsters not unlike the star-struck boy he once was. Work has been regular since graduation. I hazard a guess that he is something of a rising star. This is not gratuitous flattery. You don't work steadily in theatre unless you're good. The remark seems to embarrass him. "Let's just say I've been lucky," he replies.

Fortune continues to smile; we get the perfect table. I have been graciously deferred to in this matter and choose the one by the window, overlooking the street. Menus are handed over, we confer on the wine and order dinner. Throughout this ritual, and the meandering conversation of the next several minutes, he commands our little stage with an actorly presence. Consciously played, the mannerisms would seem affected. But they are seamlessly subtle and altogether unconscious. The effect is quite disarming. It's all in the way he studies his menu as if it were a script, the absent

stroking of his wineglass when he listens, the brief gaze into the middle distance before answering a probing question. He has this habit, from time to time, of running his fingers through his hair and then tossing his head from side to side and sitting up straight in his chair; it is an intense, delineated gesture. He is not that tall, but when he does this, in a moment of concentration, he seems tall. I keep having to adjust my own lazy sprawl in the chair to meet his eye.

Talk turns, throughout the evening, to the challenge of defining a poorly written character on stage, the subtleties involved in easing a director toward a different interpretation of a scene, our respective families, travel plans, current projects. That very week he has landed a lead in *The Castle*, opening at Toronto Free Theatre in April. He plays a knight returned from the Crusades to find his castle in a state of disarray. What interests him about the work is its "contemporary punches" at sexual politics, state politics and religion. In the month until rehearsals, he'll get into shape for the physically demanding role and disappear into the library, immersing himself in all things medieval to find out what it must have felt like to be a knight. "It's a nice role," says Stuart. "A really nice role."

I am curious about some of the other "nice roles." I find out that the previous summer he has, as he puts it, "had a part" in *Romeo and Juliet*.

"The Guy Sprung production in High Park?"

"Uh huh."

"What character did you play?"

"Romeo."

"*Romeo*?" I squeal this, practically dropping my spoon in the soup du jour in the process. "You played *Romeo*? . . . I am on a blind date with *Romeo*?" I am gripped by the overwhelming urge to rush to the phone and tell everyone I know, most particularly Marsha, who has given me strict instructions to call her, no matter what the hour, the minute this date is officially over. I confess this to Stuart. He responds with a boyish grin that I naturally find devastatingly attractive. "C'mon Stuart, you can tell me. Did you get along with your leading lady? What happens if Juliet has bad breath?"

I am assured that such was not the case. While it is not always possible to find good leading ladies, Nicky Guadagni was a "wonderful" Juliet. "All I had to do was go out there every night and fall in love with her again." This revelation prompts an enquiry as to whether life imitates art. Is it also difficult to find wonderful leading ladies offstage? I am somewhat surprised to learn that it is: "When you're working on a show, you're intensely involved in the work, obsessed with it almost, and so is everyone else. So you come together like that for a brief period of time, and then the show's over and everybody goes their separate

ways. It's often difficult to form attachments. If you are involved with someone, sometimes you're away for eight months at a stretch, and when you return the other person has gone through eight months worth of growth and so have you, but maybe in a different direction, so you try to pick up where you left off—but it's not always possible. It's a very transient life."

We are interrupted, at this point, by a very transient street vendor, who has wandered in from the cold proffering a tray of exorbitantly priced long-stemmed roses. I am gallantly offered one. Well c'mon, forget the crass commercial overtones, would you say no if Romeo offered you a long-stemmed rose? The moment, I feel, calls for a touch of sentiment. So I thank him, tell him I am having a lovely time, that he is a charming date and that I feel I owe my girlfriend a debt of gratitude for this delightful evening. "I do as well," says Stuart. "Shall we drink a toast to Marsha?"

Several hours later we are standing on the street, comfortably mellow with the wine and the evening's pleasures. I huddle against the wind waiting for Stuart to hail a cab. I want to go on the record right now and say that hailing cabs is definitely the man's job. In fact, a properly hailed cab is an unspeakably romantic gesture—the acid test of any date's mettle. I am willing to forgive a man a great deal if he can flag one down on the first try. *Don't ruin it now, Stuart. Everything's gone like clockwork.* My fears, of course, turn out to be groundless. This guy scales orchard walls for a living.

"So, how long does the meter run on this birthday present?" I ask, as the taxi whisks us home. "You don't turn into a pumpkin, do you? Would you like to come in for a while?"

Yes, he would. Yes, we listened to Springsteen and sipped a cognac by the fire. That's when I found out that he had worked on a ranch once and had picked tobacco, and is writing a screenplay about the rodeo. He talked about wanting a family some day, but first there are desert sands to see, mountains to be climbed in Tibet. As people do, we shared a few secrets by the light of the fire. Then we said goodnight.

I called Marsha, of course, when he left. I was still skating on the shiny feeling of it all. I thanked her for one of the loveliest birthdays on record. Said it would be tough to match a date with Romeo, but I'd try.

"Marsh, do you have any idea what I can get you next year? I'll start planning now."

"I'll plan," she said. "You just save. What I had in mind was a tummy tuck." ■

## Haiku

By Vincent Gambi

Brand new moon! improved!  
expensive stars on a blue background  
skies advertise the heavens